

HABS  
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31-MTDN,  
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TOWN OF MT. UNION  
Refractories Company Town  
Mt. Union  
Huntingdon County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5974

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF MT. UNION  
Refractories Company Town

HABS No. PA-5974

Location: Near U.S. Highway 522, Huntingdon County, South  
Central Pennsylvania

Founded: 1849

First brickyard

built: 1899 by W. H. Haws Fire Brick Company, bought in  
1902 by Harbison-Walker Refractories, closed 1985

Company  
houses built: ca. 1911

Second brickyard

built: 1901 by Mt. Union Silica Brick Company, bought by  
General Refractories in 1915, closed ca. 1950

Company  
houses built: 1911-19

Third brickyard

built: 1911-12 by Mt. Union Refractories Company, became  
U.S. Refractories in 1922, merged with North  
American Refractories in 1930, closed March 1990

Company  
houses built: 1916-17, see Kistler, Mifflin County (HABS No. PA-  
5976)

Significance: For the first half of the twentieth century, Mt.  
Union was a center of refractory brick  
manufacture. Three brick plants were built early  
in the century and were soon taken over by the  
three leading companies in the industry--Harbison-  
Walker Refractories Company, General Refractories  
Company, and North American Refractories. Each  
company built company housing but chose different  
ways of executing it, providing a cross-section of  
company housing styles from a planned, model town  
suburb to houses scattered on available lots  
within Mt. Union. Mirroring the decline of the  
steel and coke industries which they served, the  
brickyards were all closed by 1990.

Project  
Information:

The results of the study of refractory brickyards and towns was published in 1993: Kim E. Wallace, Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service).

The contents of this publication were transmitted to the Library of Congress in report form. See additional information on the refractories industry under HABS No. PA-5973, Refractories Company Towns, Mt. Union, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania. Research notes, field photos and copies of historic photos collected during the project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection, Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

## History

When Harbison-Walker bought the plant at Blandburg in 1894, it owned two other brickyards--its original Star Fire Brick Works in Pittsburgh and the Woodland Works in Clearfield County. By 1902 it owned thirty-three plants--twenty-seven in Pennsylvania, four in Ohio, and two in Kentucky. One of the additions to the company's holdings was the Mt. Union works of the W. H. Haws Fire Brick Company. It was built in 1899 and was the first plant in the country built exclusively to manufacture silica refractories. Harbison-Walker planned the acquisition to diversify production. The Mt. Union plant site was an excellent choice--it was on a major rail line and had a virtually endless supply of raw material literally at its back door. Ganister rock covered the slopes of the surrounding mountains that gave Mt. Union its name. The rock was plentiful enough to attract two more companies by 1911 and to support the construction of a satellite community, a model "industrial village" named Kistler.<sup>1</sup>

The first recorded settlement at Mt. Union was a store and a ferry across the Juniata River built there in the 1790s. The Pennsylvania Mainline Canal was routed along the river in 1829, and, like Bolivar, Mt. Union began as a canal village. The site seemed promising enough by 1849 for speculators to lay out a town plan and offer lots for sale. The construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1849-51 insured the town's future. By 1883 it was well established with a selection of shops and professional services, including a physician, dentist, insurance agent, and three churches--Presbyterian, Methodist, and United Brethren--to serve citizens who were primarily of German and Scotch-Irish heritage. The chief industry was A. D. Faust and Sons' tannery with "a capacity of 13,000 hides per year" and an employee roster of twenty-five men.<sup>2</sup>

The Pennsylvania Railroad and the construction of branch lines to the north and south allowed entrepreneurs to exploit the natural resources of the Allegheny Mountains. Jesse L. Hartman, based in Hollidaysburg, Blair County, specialized in quarrying and owned mining rights to extensive limestone and sandstone deposits in Blair and Huntingdon counties.<sup>3</sup> His company was the primary

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<sup>1</sup>Frank J. Mulvihill, "Kistler Industrial Village," The Wildwood Magazine (Autumn 1916), 14-15, 36.

<sup>2</sup>J. Simpson Africa, History of Huntingdon and Blair Counties, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1883), 353-56.

<sup>3</sup>E. Moore and T. G. Taylor, The Silica Refractories of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Geological Survey, 1924), 56-58. Thomas N. Kurtz, "History of Silica Brick," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society 11 (January 1932), 31. Krause, 27.

supplier of ganister for the handful of refractories companies experimenting in the production of silica brick during the 1880s. Haws Fire Brick Company, based in Johnstown, held one of the claims for the first successful manufacture of silica brick and, based on this experience, the company built a full-scale silica plant at Mt. Union bypassing suppliers like Hartman. Company miners brought ganister down from Jacks Mountain on counter-balanced dinkey cars. When Harbison-Walker Refractories bought the brickyard in 1902, its managers found the arrangement so successful that they had a second plant built, "the No. 2 works," in 1903-04, doubling capacity. By 1910, these works employed 600 men.<sup>4</sup>

The two other Mt. Union brickyards were in a sense "spin-offs" of the first. Several of Haws' partners in the Mt. Union plant were unhappy with the terms of its sale to Harbison-Walker, and they financed a rival plant, Mt. Union Silica Brick, completed in 1901. In 1915 it was sold to General Refractories which was expanding to take advantage of the increasing demand created by World War I.<sup>5</sup> The third company, Mt. Union Refractories, was organized by two former managers for Harbison-Walker, R. P. M. Davis and Clinton V. Hackman.<sup>6</sup> It was built in 1911-12 on the edge of town along the Juniata River and began operation with eight kilns. During World War I twenty-one more were built. In 1922 the company built a second plant in Clearfield County and changed its name to U. S. Refractories Company. It was merged with North American Refractories in 1930.<sup>7</sup>

While the brickyards stimulated Mt. Union's development, their influence was significantly compounded by the opening in 1915 of the Etna Explosives Company's powder plant just across the river from Mt. Union. It ran twenty-four-hour shifts and employed at least 1,000 men and women until closing at the end of 1918 after the World War I armistice. The combined employment of the brickyards and powder plant was around 3,000, a drastic increase from the twenty-five men working at the tannery thirty-five years earlier. The population of the town more than tripled, rising from 1,086 in 1900 to 3,388 in 1910. The sometimes makeshift and disreputable services and entertainments established to take

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<sup>4</sup>Kurtz, 26. Ramsay, 20. A Bi-Centennial Keepsake (Mt. Union Area Historical Society, 1976), n.p.

<sup>5</sup>"The General Refractories Company," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society 22 (November 15, 1943), 364. "The General Refractories Co.," Grefco Press 1 (August 1946), 1.

<sup>6</sup>Trisha Colyer, "Company town of Kistler was dream of Hackman, who worked to build NARCO," The Valley Log (May 9, 1990), 18. R. P. M. Davis appears occasionally as a correspondent (as superintendent at the Farrandsville plant) in the Harbison-Walker-Blandburg correspondence during the 1903 strike.

<sup>7</sup>Taylor and Moore, 44-45. "History of the North American Refractories Company Mt. Union Plant," typescript, 1.

advantage of the spending power of Mt. Union's new and often temporary citizens earned it a local reputation as "a racketeering borough . . . a second Sodom and Gomorrah."<sup>8</sup>

Because labor and housing were in high demand, each of the four companies built housing to attract workers. The type of housing each built suggests something about the kind of workers they expected and wanted to attract. The explosives company built a few single-family houses for its managers and several two- and three-story barracks-type buildings for the rest of its employees. Jobs in the munitions factory were high-paying, but they were also high-risk and short-term. They attracted mostly single men who came from a wide radius around Mt. Union and found the group living arrangement sufficient for their stay. The local newspaper complained in 1916 that the munitions plant had attracted too many people to town who did not have local family connections and created disturbances in their leisure time.<sup>9</sup>

The refractories companies expected to continue operations after the war was over; they wanted to hire family men who were assumed to be more stable and dependent on an income and who would contribute to the community and create a renewable work force of friends and family members. Refractories company housing was all designed for families and longer-term residence, but except for this basic profile, each company's housing was different. In 1911 Harbison-Walker owned 104 houses. All were two-story frame buildings; twenty-seven were duplexes. All but three were grouped on the sloping hillside around the south and west side of the plant to form a neighborhood called Ganister Hill. General Refractories, a smaller plant with fewer employees, owned forty-one houses scattered in four different areas: two rows of one-and-a-half-story, gambrel-roofed houses along east Water Street and Pennsylvania Avenue; a row of seven two-story, L-plan houses adjacent to the plant on Wausau Place; six frame houses on Shirley Street; and twelve one-story "shanties" across Hill Valley Run east of the plant in a neighborhood eponymously named Shantytown.<sup>10</sup>

While General Refractories' organization and variety of housing forms showed little concern for consolidation and uniformity, the houses Harbison-Walker built on Ganister Hill were of only two

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<sup>8</sup>"World War I Powder Plant in Mifflin County," Mifflin County Historical News (September 1984), 3. Bi-Centennial Keepsake, n.p. Mt. Union Times (February 24, 1911). James Thomas McElroy, Jr., McElroy's Family Memories (1930), 270.

<sup>9</sup>Mt. Union Times (November 19, 1915). Twice-A-Week-Republican (January 7, 1916).

<sup>10</sup>Mt. Union (Sanborn Map Company, 1919). Tax assessment records.

different types and were rationally ordered around the hillside, suggesting a more explicit policy of supervision of the workforce. And, in fact, the local newspaper praised the company in 1916 for believing it was "their duty to care for the general welfare of their people" and for inaugurating "an uplift program" among them. The company's employees, the paper reported, included "Slavish, Roumanians, Bulgarians, Italians, Greeks and Serbians" as well as "native Americans, and southern Negroes." Housing was considered to have an integral role in the "program" of social and cultural transformation: "the employees and their families should be comfortably and decently housed; and . . . they should be encouraged to keep their houses as nicely as possible." The houses were described as solid frame structures, nicely painted and slate roofed. The interiors were painted and papered, with porcelain sinks and city water, and there were plans to have them "electrically lighted and scientifically sewerred."<sup>11</sup>

The supervision and improvement of "home life" included a policy of curtailing alcohol consumption. Employees who flagrantly ignored admonishments to abstain were fired. The newspaper judged that the company's efforts were meeting with success:

the families are rising in intelligence and are more encouraged and are acquiring a desire for a better home life . . . the moral tone is improving. There is in our opinion, a compensation to the Company in better service from the men, as well as in the consciousness of a valuable service to the laborers and to their wives and children.<sup>12</sup>

Other organizations in the town also joined the company's effort. The Red Cross sponsored an "Americanization Program" that included instruction in domestic skills such as sewing, fancy work, and cooking.<sup>13</sup> The sudden influx of so many people whose ways of speaking and living were literally foreign to longer-term Mt. Union residents must have been disturbing, and the response to try to make the newcomers less challenging and more controllable by "uplifting" them into a safe, more respectable social category was common throughout the country.

In Mt. Union in the early 1950s, General Refractories sold the houses it owned on Pennsylvania Avenue and Water and Shirley streets and closed its brickyard. Shantytown and the seven

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<sup>11</sup>"Visit to Harbison-Walker Works," Twice-A-Week-Republican (January 28, 1916).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>"American Red Cross Americanization Program," Mt. Union Times (September 4, 1924).

houses next to the plant were demolished, and the plant site became the property of the town. It was cleared and made into a park and athletic field. In the 1980s, part of the site was used to build senior citizen housing and a medical center.

Harbison-Walker also reevaluated its holdings in the early 1950s and decided to divest its residential property as part of plant modernization, but rather than sell the houses to the resident employees, the company demolished the entire Ganister Hill neighborhood. The company changed its source of ganister from an area on the north side of the Juniata River to the mountain directly above the plant. A rock processing facility was built between the quarry and the plant, and ganister was sent the rest of the way down to the plant on an overhead conveyor belt that passed between two houses on Ganister Hill. The houses had been so well integrated into the brickyard complex they could not be separated to establish a physical and symbolic distinction between home and workplace. They were no longer seen as making a contribution to brickyard operations but as interfering with access to the rest of brickyard property. Certainly transferring this area to private ownership was out of the question. Residents were allowed to purchase the houses for salvage for around \$200 and materials from many were used to build new houses, particularly in an area called "the flats" northeast of the railroad along the Juniata River. Much of this neighborhood was destroyed in the 1977 flood. A federal housing project in Allenport on Mt. Union's southeast border also provided space for some of the displaced Ganister Hill residents.<sup>14</sup>

The Harbison-Walker plant operated through 1985, but at the end of November that year a company spokesman notified the United Steelworkers Union that it would be closed because the silica brick market had virtually collapsed. At the time, between twenty-five and forty-seven people were still employed, compared to 563 in 1925. North American Refractories' yard was finally closed in March 1990, and all but two of its beehive kilns have been razed.<sup>15</sup> In 1991 a small company was salvaging bricks from the Harbison-Walker plant to sell for grog and mortar. Part of the crushing and grinding building was torn down and only the stacks of the beehive kilns remained in the open yard.

In 1936 an artist employed by the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture painted a mural of Mt. Union in the new post office. He placed Harbison-Walker's smoking kilns and the

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<sup>14</sup>Nancy Shedd to author, April 9, 1992. Ivan Phillips, interview by author, Mt. Union, Pa., June 11, 1991.

<sup>15</sup>Tom Gibb, "Former Keystone of Mt. Union Business Faces Final Shutdown," Altoona Mirror (November 26, 1985).  
"NA Refractories Closes March 1 in Mt. Union," The Daily News (March 5, 1990).

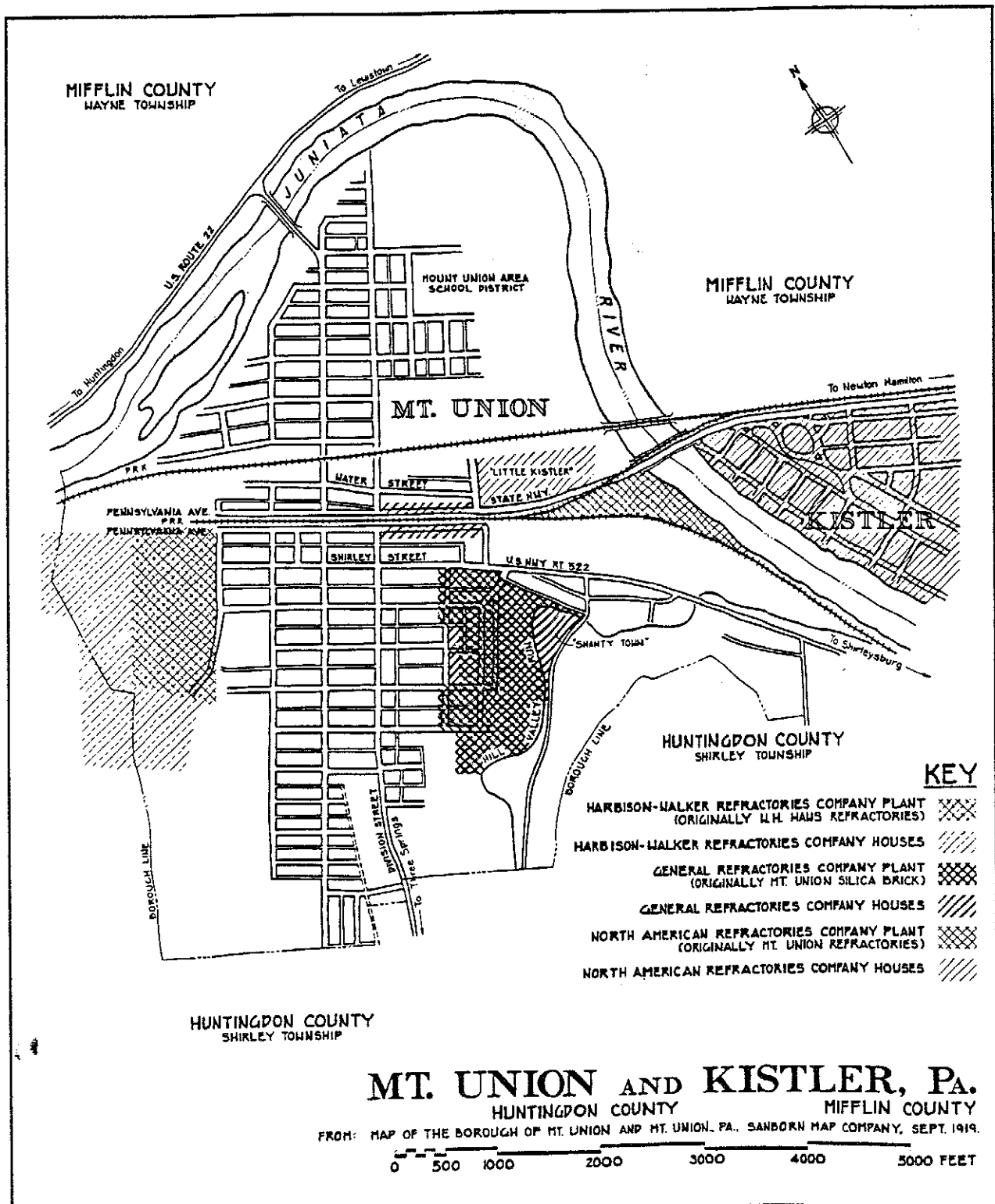


rows of Ganister Hill houses at the painting's center. In 1990 citizens of the town collected bricks from each of the three brickyards and built a platform for a mailbox outside the post office. It was a memorial to the refractories industry and to hundreds of lost jobs and another public expression of the community's identity as a brickyard town.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>The mural was signed by artist Paul Rohland. "Mailbox Holder A Tribute To Bricktowners' Heritage," Mt. Union Times (September 14, 1990).

APPENDIX



Map of Mt. Union and Kistler along the Juniata River.  
Drawn by Isabel Yang.

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service).